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SUNDAY-SCHOOL

CONVENTIONS:

THEIR

OBJECTS AND IMPORTANCE.

BY

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SUNDAY SCHOOL CONVENTIONS:

THEIR OBJECTS AND IMPORTANCE, WITH SOME HINTS
ON THE BEST METHODS OF CONDUCTING THEM.

BY REV. A. SUTHERLAND.

In the history of the Church of Christ there have been certain great epochs, distinguished by titles which indicate the religious tendencies of their respective times. Thus we have the Apologetic Period, the Polemic Period, and others similarly distinguished. Now, if I were asked to designate the religious characteristics of the present age, I should at once name it the Practical Period. For while there be ecclesiastical wizards who "peep and mutter" their doubts about the inspiration and authenticity of the blessed Bible, and others who persist in going to the dark ages for light, yet I am persuaded there never was a time, since Apostolic days, when there existed so much unity of feeling among Christian people, as now, or when the church exhibited so much practical directness in her efforts to bring this guilty world back to God. Christians are beginning to realize that life is too short, and souls too precious, to permit them to waste their moments in sectarian strife; and so the great question no longer is, "What can we do for the interests of this or that denomina-

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SUNDAY SCHOOL CONVENTIONS.

tion?" but—"What can we do for the conversion of the world?"

Among the various questions connected with this all-important subject, there is one which is steadily growing into prominence, and which seems destined to become *the* religious question of the age, namely, the religious training of the young as a means of counteracting the skeptical tendencies of the times, and of ultimately bringing the world to Christ. It is now felt to be a question on which depends, in no small degree, the future weal of the church, and to its solution she is gradually bending her best energies.

The chief causes which led to this view of the case are evident enough. That the gospel was intended for the world,—that it was suited to sinners of every age and class—was plain; but observation and experience had proved that much of its success, under God, depended upon the period of life at which the truths of that gospel were brought to bear upon the human mind; for while no class of sinners, as such, were excluded from its gracious provisions,—while under the most disadvantageous circumstances it was "mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds,"—while it had won some of its most glorious triumphs among the grey-haired votaries of sin,—yet the vast majority of those who had yielded to its influence, had done so in early life; and so at last the churches began to wake up to the truth that the great hope for the world was the conversion of the children, and

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the earlier in life this result was sought, the greater were the probabilities of success.

The great question, then, is now no longer in regard to the practicability of securing the early conversion of the children : that is generally conceded ; but it is in reference to the best means of securing so desirable a consummation. And this has called the attention of the church more prominently to the fact that an agency already exists well calculated for the purpose of training the young in the knowledge of things divine. True, its real value is not yet fully understood ; but it is destined, nevertheless, to become one of the most powerful auxiliaries of the church, both as a means for the religious training of her children, and as a missionary agency for reaching the neglected masses beyond her pale. That agency, I need hardly say, is the Sunday School. It is easy to see what a powerful instrument for good it may become if properly conducted, and its legitimate end kept steadily in view. But how is its highest efficiency to be secured ? What means can be employed in order to develop to the utmost its powers for good ?

Naturally enough it has been felt that mutual consultation among those engaged in the work, is the most likely method of finding an answer to these questions. It is seen that the principle obtains in reference to other matters with the most beneficial results. Learned men meet to discuss problems in philosophy, and to communicate the results of their investigations

in the boundless field of scientific research ; politicians convene to debate grave constitutional questions or party issues ; while operatives connected with the great branches of human industry meet to take counsel in reference to the interests of their respective crafts. And if the church has been slow to avail herself of the benefits of similar associations, it can be explained only on the principle that "the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light." At last, however, the hint has been taken. Christians are beginning to learn that "in union there is strength," and that mutual consultation and prayer are helpful, in a very high degree, in the great work of winning souls to Christ. The principle has been applied in an especial manner, to the Sunday School enterprise, and the benefits which have already resulted have demonstrated the wisdom of the plan. But as every new movement is liable to be misunderstood and misrepresented, it becomes necessary to state, plainly and briefly, THE OBJECTS AND IMPORTANCE OF SUNDAY SCHOOL CONVENTIONS.

1. One object of Sunday School Conventions is,—*To attract public attention to that much-neglected work—the religious training of the young.* In every community it has been a source of deep anxiety to pious and thoughtful minds to mark the numberless ways in which the young are lured from the paths of virtue and truth ; and to such this has always been a question of absorbing interest,—“What can be done to counter-

act the growing tendency to skepticism and immorality among the youth of our country?" The only answer seemed to be, "They must be religiously taught." But another question remained,—“How can we bring them within the reach of religious teaching? The world at large cares nothing about it, and even the churches seem but half awake. Something must be done, in the first instance, to awaken interest; but what? and how?” Sunday School Conventions were designed to solve the problem, and in this they have succeeded almost beyond the expectations of their warmest friends. They have brought the subject of the religious training of the young prominently before the people. They have brought facts and arguments to bear upon the Christian mind of the country of which it had hitherto been ignorant, and thus have succeeded in evoking a degree of interest almost unprecedented in the history of any religious movement. Not a few who were at first attracted to these conventions by their mere novelty, were stirred up to make a fresh consecration of their talents and powers to the work of Sunday School teaching, and returned home to labor, with redoubled zeal, to gather in the neglected children and train them up for God. The result of these labors has already become manifest in the organization of schools where none existed before, and in large accessions of scholars and teachers to those previously established. Of the correctness of these statements we have striking proof in the neigh-

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boring States. Only a few years have passed since the first State Sunday School Convention was held there, but already in many of the States the organization extends to almost every county, and in not a few localities nearly the whole population have become interested, and are directly or indirectly engaged in the work.

2. A second object of Sunday School Conventions is,—*To increase the interest of the churches in that all-important subject, the conversion of the children to God.* A lady once entered a room where a child lay dying. Before taking her leave she was requested to engage in prayer, but declined, saying, in an apologetic manner, "It's only a child." The little one raised herself up and, with a gesture of intense earnestness, said : "I know, Ma'am, I'm only a child, but O, I've got a soul !" And has not the attitude of the church towards the lambs of the flock been too much like that of the lady referred to ? Practically the church has said,—*"They are only children."* Now, one design of Sunday School Conventions is to keep prominently before the churches the fact that the great end of Sunday School teaching is the conversion of the children. And who that has attended one of these gatherings, and listened to the thrilling stories of children converted to God in their earliest years, giving subsequent evidence of the genuineness of the change,—some of them growing up to be useful, God-fearing men and women, others dying in the triumphs of Gospel faith,—has not felt

his bosom swell with an entirely new conception of the thought that children have souls,—ay, and souls capable of knowing Christ, and of loving him with an intensity of devotion that might put the lukewarmness of older Christians to the blush. The churches are beginning to see that they have been under a sad mistake in supposing that children, as such, were incapable of those spiritual exercises which are involved in the idea of conversion ; and to Sunday School Conventions are due, in no small degree, the credit of bringing about this better state of thought and feeling. That a vast improvement has taken place in this direction a single fact will show :—The returns presented at the New York State Convention in the year 1866 reported over eighteen thousand Sunday School children as having been converted during the year !

3. A third, and highly important, object of Sunday School Conventions is—*To aid in qualifying Sunday School Teachers for their work.* Now, far be it from me to depreciate the self-denying zeal of those who labor in our schools. Their efforts are worthy of all praise, and if they become not weary in well-doing they shall, in due time, reap the reward of their toil. Still it cannot be denied that many of them are very imperfectly qualified for their work. Nor will this excite surprise when we remember that until the era of Sunday School Conventions no efforts were made to train young men and women for this important task. It was assumed that Sunday School teaching was so simple a matter that any one could do it with-

out any preparation at all. This was a great mistake, the effects of which we now feel, but the magnitude of which we are just beginning to realize. It may be true that "a poet is born—not made," but this can be true only in a very limited sense, of a Sunday School Teacher. There are, it may be, certain qualities, not the product of any special training, which are important in their place; but unless these are supplemented by a fair knowledge of the subjects to be taught, and an acquaintance with the best methods of imparting instruction, the teacher must plod on at an immense disadvantage. Let us not be deceived; no one ever became a successful Sunday School Teacher by accident,—no one ever dropped by chance on the best method of doing the work. Besides personal piety, two conditions are essential to success: the teacher must have the proper appliances, and he must know the best methods of using them. To supply, in some measure, the first, and to afford instruction in the second, is one of the main objects of Sunday School Conventions. That they have, in some good degree, accomplished this object, those who have attended them can cheerfully testify; for who that has listened to the lucid statements, or witnessed the model lessons, of some of our ablest Sunday School workers, has not experienced an extensive and beneficial change in his ideas with reference to Sunday School teaching? I think the views of many, on the whole question, may be summed up in the language of a minister who attended the Montreal Convention of 1865. In the

course of a conversation with some friends he said,—
“Brethren, I must confess I have become a convert to your Sunday School Conventions. I used to think that Sunday School teaching was so simple an affair, that but little could be said about it; but I find that ‘as iron sharpeneth iron, so doth the countenance of a man his friend;’ and I find also that a teacher may pick up a vast number of practical hints which may be of great use to him in his work.” Let it be understood, however, that the value of these Conventions to the Sunday School teacher consists not so much in the amount of Biblical information conveyed, as in the hints afforded concerning the kind of knowledge required, the means of acquiring it, and the best methods of communicating that information to others. In this way Sunday School Conventions become Normal Institutes for the training of the teacher,—showing him what to teach and how to teach it.

4. Still another object of Sunday School Conventions, is—*To increase the feeling of sympathy between parents and teachers, and thus to strengthen the hands of the latter for their work.* It is a common complaint, and one for which there is too much foundation, that the members of our congregations do not feel that interest which they ought in the work of the Sunday School teacher, and that the latter is left to toil on, year after year, without help and without encouragement. But we seek, by means of Sunday School Conventions to bring about a better understanding and a better feeling between the classes referred to. We seek to con-

vince Christian parents of the vast importance of this work, to point out the difficulties and discouragements which lie in the way of its successful prosecution, and thereby to secure, for the Sunday School Teacher, the united support and sympathy of all who love the lambs of the flock.

The limits of a tract like this preclude a fuller statement of the objects of Sunday School Conventions. The leading objects have been stated, and this must suffice for the present. We now proceed to notice briefly, the importance of these annual gatherings.

1. *Sunday School Conventions are important in view of their ultimate object,—the Salvation of the Young.* The mere coming together of some hundreds of Christian men and women, for mutual consultation and prayer, is a circumstance not without its importance ; but when we consider that these consultations and prayers have direct reference to the spread of Christ's Kingdom among the children, such associations assume at once a graver significance. For just as an agency combining in itself all the elements of power, becomes contemptible when directed to a trifling result, (like an ocean lashed into tempest "to waft a feather, or to drown a fly,") so an agency, in itself feeble, becomes important when linked to some sublime end. We cannot, indeed, unqualifiedly endorse the maxim that "the end always justifies the means ;" but when, in a work like this, the means are such as are sanctioned by the spirit and general tenor of the Written Word, they receive an additional lustre and dignity from the

glorious end they seek to accomplish. It is thus with our Sunday School Conventions. Feeble in themselves they may be, yet are they instinct with the mighty power of Him who never fails to own and bless sincere and earnest efforts for the extension of His kingdom ; and linked, as they are, to the most glorious end that could enlist the sympathies of human, or even of angelic, minds, they occupy no inferior place among those agencies by which God is working out His gracious purposes in the earth.

2. *They are important in view of the impulse they give to our Sunday School Work.* That the religious training of the young will have a powerful influence upon the future of the church and of the world, is evident ; any means, therefore, which gives an impulse to the work must be important. True, all impulses are not necessarily good. An impulse may be given to a bad cause as well as to a good one,—in a wrong as well as in a right direction ; and this fact becomes doubly impressive when we remember that an evil impulse, once generated, is thenceforth beyond the power of the human agent, and cannot be directed or controlled, but goes on, working out its terrible consequences, in spite of every effort to restrain it. Thus the leaders in the great French Revolution worked upon the passions of the multitude until they had generated impulses for evil which spurned all control, and they could only gaze in trembling horror at the power of the demon they had evoked, and whose victims many of them soon became. But in developing

the power of Sunday School Conventions as an agency for the religious training and salvation of the children, we have this confidence, that the impulse is perfectly safe. The cause is good—the impulse is in the right direction ; and it is a law of such impulses that they contain within themselves the power of direction and control. Too long has the power of the church lain dormant ; but now the quickenings of a new life are everywhere becoming manifest as a fruit of these annual gatherings ; and we trust the result, under God's blessing, will be a tide of spiritual influences which shall carry the children by tens of thousands into the kingdom of God.

3. *They are important because of their tendency to soften denominational asperities, and to promote the spirit of unity and brotherly love.* Almost every one has heard the story which a good man once told his pastor : Said he, "I was walking out early this morning while a dense mist covered the ground. While passing a lonely spot I saw what appeared to be a huge misshapen monster, coming to meet me. My first thought was to run back ; but finally I resolved to stand my ground. It came nearer, and then I saw it was a man. I went to meet him and lo ! *it was my brother John !*" The illustration may be homely, but it is sufficiently in point. Looked at through the mists of denominational prejudice, we sometimes appear to each other as monsters ; approaching a little nearer we find that, after all, those who differ from us are men ; but when we unite in

the glorious work of bringing the little ones to Jesus, we realize, as we do not at other times, that "one is" our "master, even Christ, and all" we "are brethren." Indeed, one can hardly conceive any means better calculated to promote this fraternal feeling, than our Sunday-School Conventions. Here are no tests of denominational shibboleths,—here are no party strifes to engender bitterness; but the feeling of each to each is, "if thine heart is right, as my heart is with thy heart, give me thine hand." And in this we see an illustration, if not a partial fulfilment of that ancient prophecy, "The lion and the lamb shall lie down together, and a little child shall lead them."

It only remains to add a few hints on—

THE BEST METHOD OF CONDUCTING SUNDAY-SCHOOL CONVENTIONS.

As the mere business details are always arranged by competent committees, all that is necessary here is to state a few guiding principles.

1. Keeping steadily in view the great end for which we labour—the salvation of souls,—it will readily be admitted that, in all our Conventions *the devotional element should largely predominate*.—When we forget that our work is a purely spiritual one, the value of these conventions will be gone forever. For just as the most beautifully constructed piece of machinery is but a dead, inert mass, when separated from its motive power, so the most perfect religious

organization is but a splendid failure unless it be instinct with divine life and energy. Upon the door-posts of our assemblies should this truth be inscribed, "Not by might nor by power, but by my spirit saith the Lord." As a part of the devotional exercises, sacred song should hold a prominent place. The power of music as an auxiliary in Sunday-School work is becoming more and more apparent; but in order to prevent this interesting and beautiful part of worship from degenerating into a mere scientific performance, we should aim at impressing upon it a purely devotional character.

2. As the time available at these conventions is short, it is important that *all the exercises should be brief*. Any disposition to indulge in mere speech-making, especially during business session, should be firmly repressed. A Sunday School Convention is not a theatre for the display of oratorical gifts, but a place where Christian men and women meet to converse together respecting the best methods of training the young for Heaven. Hence I think the discussions should partake more of the character of *conversations* than of *debates*, and that the aim of each member should be—not to win a victory in debate, or to carry some favorite point, but—to communicate, as briefly as possible, those results of his observations and experience in the matter of Sunday School teaching which he conceives may be useful to others, and to gather from the observation and experience of others whatever will be useful to himself. All who attend

these Conventions, therefore, would do well to study the art of condensing what they wish to say into the smallest possible compass.

3. *Great attention should be given to the training of Teachers.* We have it on the authority of some of the chief educators in the world, that teaching is not only a science, but also an art, and the remark holds good in reference to Sunday School teaching just as truly as to that which is purely secular. It is important, therefore, that every possible effort should be made to perfect in the art those who labor in our Sunday Schools. Hence I think considerable time should be devoted to model lessons, black-board exercises, &c. It would be well, also, if at such times classes of Sunday School scholars could be introduced, that the most experienced teachers might have a better opportunity of illustrating their methods of communicating instruction.*

4. *Information in regard to the State of our Sunday School work should not be overlooked.* Consequently sufficient time should be given for presenting statistical returns, and for County or Township Secretaries to give a verbal statement of the progress of the work in their respective localities.

* Since the above was written, Sunday School Institutes have been multiplying. It might be profitable, therefore, to regard the Convention as a means of increasing interest,—of awaking enthusiasm, and the Institute as a place for training teachers.

5. *All subjects which would interfere with the non-sectarian character of the Convention, should be avoided, especially those which bear on controverted points of doctrine.** If these are once admitted, the harmony and usefulness of our Conventions will be destroyed. For similar reasons it would not be prudent to endorse the publications of any particular house or society; because upon such matters there is always great diversity of opinion, and it is better to leave teachers and schools to form their own judgment. Such a course will also prevent the Convention from being made a mere advertising agency for particular publishers.

6. **FINALLY,**—Let us keep the great end steadily in view. Let us remember that our Conventions are successful just in proportion as they result in leading the children to Jesus. Time and space forbid me to say more. Let us “love as brethren.” Let us pray for the time when “all” our “children shall be taught of the Lord.” Then shall our Conventions be “neither barren nor unfruitful,” but rather “times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.” And when at last “we gather at the river—the beautiful river,” it will not lessen our joys to remember that we faithfully tried to fulfil one of the Saviour’s last behests to his disciples,—“Feed my lambs.”

* This was written in reference to mixed Conventions. Of course where denominational Conventions are held the caution will be unnecessary.

